



# Ahimsā

Newsletter of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

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## Can Meditation Be Bad for You?

BY MARY GARDEN

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Back in 1979, when I was living in Pune, India, as a starry-eyed devotee of the infamous guru Bhagwan Rajneesh, something happened that has disturbed me to this day. A man who had just come down from Kathmandu after completing a thirty-day Tibetan Buddhist meditation course killed himself. I had met him the night before, and we'd had coffee together. I don't remember what we spoke about, but he was friendly and didn't appear distressed. But the next day, he climbed to the top of the multi-storied Blue Diamond Hotel and leapt off.

The Bhagwan, at his first lecture after the man's suicide, tried to reassure us by saying the man had already reincarnated as a more enlightened soul. But I was quite upset and remember thinking how strange it was that someone should kill himself after a meditation course. Isn't meditation something you do to get — at the very least — peace of mind? I wondered whether he might have had a mental illness and perhaps shouldn't have taken the course in the first place. Even if he had, shouldn't the meditation have helped? It didn't occur to me that the meditation itself might have caused a mental imbalance that tipped him over the edge — that meditation could be dangerous for some people. Has such a notion ever appeared in the mainstream media, let alone the myriad New Age magazines?

Since the 1970s, meditation has become increasingly popular in the West and is promoted as a way to reduce stress, bring about relaxation, and even manage depression. It's now being used in classrooms, prisons, and hospitals. Here in Australia, meditation groups and teachers have popped up like mushrooms: hundreds head off to the free (donation only) ten-day Vipassanā courses, or sit and meditate with groups such as the Brahma Kumaris or Sahaja Yoga. There is a general assumption and belief that meditation is a secular technique and is good for everyone.

The most common types of meditation taught include sitting still and concentrating on the breath, silently repeating a sound (mantra) or visualizing an image. What is often overlooked is that these Eastern meditation techniques were never meant to be methods to reduce stress and bring about relaxation. They are essentially spiritual tools, designed to apparently "cleanse" the mind of impurities and disturbances so as to attain so-called "enlightenment" — a concept as nebulous as God.

In the Hindu scripture *The Bhagavad Gita*, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna:

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## Activities

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship:

- Conducts informal seminars on Buddhism.
- Prepares and distributes free educational material.

## Programs

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship sponsors the following programs:

- Instructions in meditation.
- Dhamma study groups.
- Retreats (at IMC-USA).

There are no fees for any of the activities or programs offered by the organization. Seminars are designed to present basic information about Buddhism to the general public — anyone may attend. However, study groups and meditation instructions are open to members only.

Retreats last ten days and are coordinated through IMC-USA in Westminster, MD (410-346-7889). Fees are set by IMC-USA. Advance registration is required.

One-on-one discussions about one's individual practice or about Buddhism in general are also available upon request. These discussions are accorded confidential treatment. There is no fee for one-on-one discussions. ■

## Purpose of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship is an educational organization whose purpose is to preserve and promote the original teachings of the Buddha in the West.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship actively encourages an ever-deepening process of commitment among Westerners to live a Buddhist way of life in accordance with the original teachings of the Buddha.

The Charleston Buddhist Fellowship provides free educational material to those who want to learn about Buddhism and about how to put the teachings of the Buddha into practice.

The goals of the Charleston Buddhist Fellowship are:

1. To provide systematic instruction in the Dhamma, based primarily on Pali sources.
2. To promote practice of the Dhamma in daily life.
3. To provide guidance on matters relating to the Dhamma, its study, and its practice.
4. To encourage the study of the Pali language and literature.
5. To maintain close contact with individuals and groups interested in promoting and supporting the foregoing goals. ■

## Dhamma Study Group

There are currently no active programs — the Dhamma study group focusing on the *Abhidhammattha Sangaha* by Ācariya Anuruddha has been permanently canceled. Those who may have questions about particular Dhamma topics or about their individual practice are encouraged to contact Allan Bomhard at (843) 720-8531 or by e-mail at [bomhard@aol.com](mailto:bomhard@aol.com). ■

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*Sitting and concentrating the mind on a single object, controlling the thoughts and the activities of the senses, let the yogi practice meditation for self-purification ... by always keeping the mind fixed on the Self, the yogi whose mind is subdued attains peace of the Supreme nirvāṇa by uniting with Me.*

And Śrī Lankan-born K. Śrī Dhammananda, who, before his death in 2006, was the foremost Theravāda Buddhist monk in Malaysia and Singapore, wrote: “No one can attain Nibbāna [nirvāṇa] or salvation without developing the mind through meditation. Meditation is a gentle way of conquering the defilements which pollute the mind.”

What is interesting is that Buddhist and Hindu teachers, even the Dalai Lama, have occasionally pointed out the potential hazards of meditation. Dhammananda warned:

*The practice of meditation has been abused by people. They want immediate and quick results, just as they expect quick returns for everything they do in daily life ... the mind must be brought under control in slow degrees and one should not try to reach for the higher states without proper training. We have heard of over-enthusiastic young men and women literally going out of their minds because they adopted the wrong attitudes towards meditation.*

Dr. Lorin Roche, a meditation teacher, says a major problem arises from the way meditators interpret Buddhist and Hindu teachings. He points out that meditation techniques that encourage detachment from the world were intended only for monks and nuns. He has spent thirty years doing interviews with people who meditate regularly and says many were depressed. He says they have tried to detach themselves from their desires, their loves, and their passion. “Depression is a natural result of loss, and, if you internalize teachings that

poison you against the world, then, of course, you will become depressed.”

The Dalai Lama has said that Eastern forms of meditation have to be handled carefully: “Westerners who proceed too quickly to deep meditation should learn more about Eastern traditions and get better training than they usually do. Otherwise, certain physical or mental difficulties appear.”

I don’t remember any such warnings when I began meditating, and probably wouldn’t have taken much notice if there were. Along with fellow seekers, I regarded any negative experiences as healing or just clearing out bad karma.

I meditated a lot in the 1970s and thought I was superior to those who didn’t. Thankfully, I didn’t have a breakdown (though sometimes I was surely “out of my mind”). I had all sorts of bizarre and strange experiences and, in the early days, often felt bliss and ecstasy. There were a few occasions where I felt as though I was “one with the universe”, and I once began hallucinating that the trees outside were vibrating with white light, convinced I could hear the sacred *Om* sound booming through the Himalayan night.

In addition to Hindu meditations — which involved mumbling mantras of various kinds (I even spent time with the Hare Krishnas in Vrindaban, where I used a 108-beaded *māla* to chant “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare ...” throughout the day) — I also attended five ten-day Buddhist Vipassanā retreats. The teacher was S. N. Goenka. His organization now leads retreats worldwide and they are, by far, the most popular meditation courses offered. They involve sitting for up to fourteen hours a day, watching the breath and sensations in the body, and trying to become detached. The aim (apart from enlightenment) is equanimity. Blissful feelings have to be disregarded, along with feelings of physical discomfort — even excruciating agony — that may arise from prolonged sitting. Meditators are not allowed to talk, write, or read. There is no evening meal, just a cup of herbal tea.

When I finally gave up on seeking enlightenment in the late 1970s and returned to worldly life, I also gave up meditating — except for the occasional sitting still for a few minutes here and there, watching my breath in the Vipassanā way. However, over the years, I would beat myself up about my laziness: “You *should* meditate,” my inner critic would harp. “Every day, for at least half an hour.” But why? I now ask. Did it really do me any good? I manage my life perfectly well without it. If I want peace and relaxation, I have a massage, or soak in a hot bath or swim twenty laps at the local pool. Or I go for a long leisurely walk. Or I just sit in a chair and do nothing. Is meditation really as beneficial as its proponents claim?

Arthur Chappell, a former devotee of Guru Maharaj (also known as Prem Rawat), points out that meditation starves the mind of stimulus (sensory deprivation), and he wonders whether desensitizing the mind to stimuli may actually “affect one’s ability to react properly with the level of fear, love, and other emotions required in any given social situation.” Chappell says minds can atrophy — just like limbs do — if they aren’t used for a wide range of purposes:

*Many meditation practitioners have complained of difficulty doing simple arithmetic and remembering names of close friends after prolonged meditation. The effect is rather like that of Newspeak’s obliteration of the English language in George Orwell’s 1984.*

In recent years, neuroscientists have been examining the effects of meditation on the brain. Professor Richard Davidson of Wisconsin, a long-term Buddhist meditator himself, claims that meditation can “change neural states in circuits that may be important for compassionate behavior and attentional and emotional regulation.” However, other scientists argue that Davidson’s claims are unsubstantiated and that his studies have serious flaws ranging from experimental design to conclusions. Dr. Nancy Hayes, a

neurobiologist at the Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in New Jersey, says that Davidson and his supporters promote research before it has been replicated. And what is really interesting, but never highlighted, is that Davidson himself points out that, for psychologists using meditation to treat their patients, “Meditation is not going to be good for all patients with emotional disorders and it may even be bad for certain types of patients.”

Dr. Solomon Snyder, head of neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University, warns that, during meditation, the brain releases serotonin. This may help those with mild depression, but too much serotonin can cause, in some, a paradoxical relaxation-induced anxiety. Instead of relaxing during meditation, these people become distressed and may even have panic attacks. Snyder says that, in some cases of schizophrenia, meditation can launch a person straight into psychosis.

And what about all those good feelings one can experience in meditation? Is there another explanation, for example, for that transcendental feeling of being one with the universe?

Dr. Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania scanned the brains of long-term practitioners of Buddhism while they were meditating and compared them with images taken when they were not. Newberg saw that blood flow to the posterior superior parietal lobe decreased during meditation. This area of the brain determines the boundaries of one’s body in relation to the environment and allows us to navigate a complex three-dimensional world without bumping into things. “We know that the posterior superior parietal lobe plays that particular role because there are patients with damage in this same region who literally cannot move around without falling,” Newberg reports. “They’ll miss the chair they intended to sit on, and generally have a fuzzy understanding of where their body ends and the rest of the universe begins.” He says that, when people have spiritual experiences and feel they become one with the universe and lose their sense of self, it may be because of what is happening in that area of the brain. “If you block that area, you lose that boundary between the self

and the rest of the world.” Were the Buddhist meditators merely experiencing an odd side effect of submitting their brains to unusual conditions?

Dr. Michael Persinger, a professor of neuroscience at the Laurentian University in Canada, studied 1,018 meditators in 1993 and found that meditation can bring on symptoms of complex partial epilepsy such as visual abnormalities, hearing voices, feeling vibrations, or experiencing automatic behaviors such as narcolepsy. Note that epileptic patients who suffer from seizures in the temporal lobes have auditory or visual hallucinations, which they often interpret as mystical experiences. Some are convinced that they conversed with God.

In recent years, Persinger set out to investigate so-called “mystical” experiences under controlled laboratory conditions. He got volunteers to wear a helmet fitted with a set of magnets through which he ran a weak electromagnetic signal. Persinger found that the magnetically induced seizures in the temporal lobes generate the same sort of hallucinations and mystical experiences reported by epileptic patients. Four in five people, he says, report a “mystical experience, the feeling that there is a sentient being or entity standing behind or near” them. Some weep, some feel God has touched them, others become frightened and talk of demons and evil spirits. “That’s in the laboratory,” Persinger notes, referring to subjects’ knowledge of a controlled environment. “How much more intense might these experiences be if they happened late at night, or in a pew in a mosque or synagogue?”

Does this indicate that so-called mystical experiences may be caused by seizures, by a temporary malfunction of the brain circuitry triggered by abnormal conditions such as sensory deprivation or decreased blood flow to the parietal lobe? Is that what happened to me?

In addition to the neuroscientists’ findings, there is anecdotal evidence that shouldn’t be overlooked. Clearly, there are potential dangers with long meditation retreats, particularly for beginners.

Christopher Titmuss, a former Buddhist monk who now lives in England, holds yearly Vipassanā meditation retreats in Bodh Gaya, India. He reports that occasionally people go through very traumatic experiences and require round the clock support, the use of strong drugs, or even hospitalization. “Others may experience a short-lived terror of the mind utterly out of control, a temporary fear of going mad,” he notes. “Or an alienation from conventional reality that makes it difficult for consciousness to recover without active intervention.” But Titmuss claims it isn’t the meditation that causes such behavior: “The function of meditation, as the Buddha points out, is to act as a mirror to what is.”

On a Goenka Vipassanā discussion board called tribe.net, a participant named Tristan writes:

*I wish I could say wonderful things about my experience but I can't. I stayed the full ten days, many of them filled with incredible hallucinations, from being inside an egg, to being a bird-like animal with broken wings, to following tunnels through my brain, to feeling completely connected to the universe. No problem, I told myself, it's just sensation. I'm perfectly safe. On the last day of the retreat, listening to the last lecture, I let out a huge scream and fell down.*

Tristan says he became psychotic and ended up in a psychiatric hospital for several weeks.

With Goenka’s courses, there have been a number of failed suicide attempts in India, including one that resulted in a broken spine and another in which the survivor suffered a ruptured lung and a fractured skull. Researchers at Goenka’s headquarters at Igatpuri looked at cases concerning nine persons who’d harmed themselves after a course, and they found all had either practiced other forms of meditation, used healing techniques, or used drugs prior to doing a course. They consequently attributed the serious mental disturbances following the retreat not as side effects of the meditation technique, but to the practice or use of these other things.



But a woman who recently contacted me said her son did a Vipassanā course in January in New Zealand, found it to be a very positive experience that produced many good feelings of love and so forth, but that, within a few days of his return, he'd had a "psychotic episode." He was committed to a mental hospital, where he responded well to medication and is now on antidepressants. Her son had no history of mental instability, nor was there any such history in the family. He had never tried meditation before nor had he taken drugs.

Geoffrey Dawson, a Sydney-based Zen meditation teacher and psychotherapist, has come across twenty people who had mentally distressing experiences as a result of attending courses at the Goenka Vipassanā Retreat Center in Blackheath (located in the Blue Mountains of Australia). Dawson says these meditators became fragmented rather than integrated, and their experiences included panic attacks, depressive episodes, or both that, in most cases, persisted months after the retreat ended. There were also some manic episodes, one of which later became diagnosed and treated as a bipolar disorder. Dawson was also contacted by a woman whose daughter had been to a retreat. Her friends and family noticed she became withdrawn and obsessive afterwards. Her psychological condition deteriorated and, some months later, she became psychotic. Within eighteen months, she was hospitalized and committed suicide.

Dawson maintains it is of utmost importance to give people a gradual introduction to meditation retreats, something that is lacking in Goenka's [and others] approach. Dawson is highly selective about who can do his retreats. He starts people on regular daily meditation along with one group meditation per week, then introduces them to one or two day retreats, and gradually introduces them to a longer retreat.

Dawson suggests that "if a gradual approach to meditation retreats is adopted, supportive processes are put in place during retreats, and follow-up care is provided," while it's not guaranteed participants won't have adverse

experiences, "it can certainly help prevent and minimize the development of mental disorders."

Colorado-based clinical psychologist Dr. Lois Vanderkooi, who has written on meditation-related psychosis, points out that screening is important when intensive meditation is involved and suggests that it can be done easily with a questionnaire that asks about psychiatric history.

Questionnaires are now used for Goenka's retreats. He says retreats aren't recommended for people with serious psychiatric disorders, as it is unrealistic to expect that Vipassanā will cure or alleviate mental problems. Application forms have questions such as, "Do you have, or have you ever had, any mental health problems such as significant depression or anxiety, panic attacks, manic depression, schizophrenia?" There is also a question, "Have you had any previous experience with meditation techniques, therapies, or healing practices?" This particular question allows Goenka to screen out people who practice a spiritual therapy called Reiki. He says there were many cases around the world where mixing Reiki and Vipassanā meditation harmed Reiki practitioners to the extent that some of them became mentally imbalanced. Goenka argues that such practices "attempt to alter reality by means of calling on some external force or autosuggestion (such as self-hypnosis). This prevents the practitioner from observing the truth as it is."

But are questionnaires enough? They can hardly screen those people who have undiagnosed psychiatric disorders. They also rely on people telling the truth. People may feel reluctant to fill them out honestly in case they are barred from participating in a retreat. The Icarus Project, a web community supporting those with mental illnesses, regards questionnaires as "arbitrary, intrusive, and discriminatory" and claims that retreat applicants "simply hide their psychiatric history on the application to avoid stigmatization." They also write that people with schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, or bipolar disorder have not only completed meditation retreats, but discovered that meditation is a valuable recovery tool.

Richard, a former meditator who gave only his first name, offers the following observations:

*Those who play the “mental illness” defense card seem to have a vested interest in Eastern philosophy. Meditation appears to create mental imbalance by messing with the brain’s chemistry. For all we know, the mentally ill might be better equipped to deal with such alterations since they’re used to them. In other words, the mental illness defense doesn’t appear to be based on fact, but as a knee-jerk excuse for why we see negative occurrences related to meditation — “he or she was crazy to begin with, it wasn’t the meditation, it was their problem.”*

If one isn’t after enlightenment or spiritual experiences, then I can’t help thinking that exercise may be better for physical and mental well being than meditation. I just love my morning swims in the local pool.

After my Indian odyssey and my return to worldly life in 1979, I’ve found being back in the world not such a bad thing after all. I no longer regard the world as a place from which to escape or detach myself. My mind is no longer something to conquer or to cleanse of impurities. In fact, my life is immeasurably richer without meditation, as was that of India’s great poet Rabindranath Tagore, exemplified in his poem “Against Meditative Knowledge”:

*Those who wish to sit, shut their eyes, and meditate to know if the world’s true or lies, may do so. It’s their choice. But I meanwhile with hungry eyes that can’t be satisfied shall take a look at the world in broad daylight. (1896) ■*

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## Comments on Garden’s Article

BY ALLAN R. BOMHARD

Garden makes some very important points in her article. First, she notes that meditation is considered to be a spiritual discipline in Hinduism and Buddhism. In Buddhism, meditation forms part of the threefold training: (1) morality (*sīla*); (2) concentration (*samādhi*); and (3) wisdom (*paññā*). Second, Garden does an excellent job of describing some of the pitfalls of meditation. Finally, she inadvertently shows that meditation works. That is to say, she provides corroborating evidence from Western sources that meditation is a extremely powerful transformational technique.

Let us look at these points in a little more detail.

## Spiritual Disciplines

It is important to remember that these spiritual disciplines are not just to be studied, read, or listened to — they are to be practiced. Moreover, to be truly effective, the practice of these spiritual disciplines must be accompanied by commitment. As pointed out by Ayya Khema, the problem is that few people are capable of wholehearted commitment, and that is why so few people experience a real transformation through their spiritual practice. It is a matter of giving up our own viewpoints, of letting go of opinions and preconceived ideas, and, instead, following the Buddha’s guidelines. Although this sounds simple in theory, in actual practice, most people find it extremely difficult. Their ingrained viewpoints, based on deductions derived from cultural and social norms, are in the way. Add to this the short attention span of most Americans, coupled with their impatience for anything less than instant gratification, and you get a sure recipe for disaster.

I have known several American practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism who want to plunge directly into Tantric empowerments without having done any of the preliminary work and others who want to attain jhānic states but who have no interest in reorienting their thoughts, speech, or actions in line with the Teachings or the Precepts and who have little, if any, understanding of what it is that they are getting into. I have known yet others who are only interested in the aspects of Buddhism that appeal to them. One example that comes to mind is a friend in Boston who was attracted to Tibetan Buddhism because of the wrathful deities. It just so happened that he had a rather “wrathful” temperament before ever being exposed to Tibetan Buddhism, and, consequently, he related to the wrathful deities. By selecting just the parts of Buddhism that we find appealing means that we are only reinforcing our pre-existing habitual ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. Needless to say, by this approach, we will gain none of the transformational benefits of Buddhist practice, and, as exemplified by Garden in her article, we would be better off by returning to the life of a non-practitioner.

In His wisdom, the Buddha realized the problems in trying to pursue these spiritual disciplines while being enmeshed in worldly affairs. That is why He set up the Order of Monks and Nuns. Bound by a strict set of rules and regulations, Monks and Nuns devote their entire lives to study, practice, and service. The monastic life offers its members not only a blameless means of livelihood but also structure, discipline, tradition, and communal support.

### Pitfalls of Meditation

Enlightenment is NOT something you add to what you already have — it is a complete transformation to another mode of being. Without this understanding before attempting to practice the spiritual disciplines taught by the Buddha, we have the potential to cause ourselves great spiritual harm, not only in our present life, but in

countless future lives as well. In order to avoid these pitfalls, we need to proceed slowly, step by step, with full commitment, allowing our practice to develop naturally, both in terms of our understanding as well as our mastery of the spiritual disciplines taught by the Buddha. Furthermore, we need to find and follow the guidance of a qualified teacher. As noted in the *Dhammapada* (verses 76—78):

76. *If you find someone wise, who can steer you away from the wrong path, follow that person as you would one who can reveal hidden treasures. Only good can come from following such a person.*
77. *Those who are wise should admonish others; they should give advice to others; and they should prevent others from doing what is wrong. Ones such as these are held dear by the good; they are disliked only by the bad.*
78. *Make friends with those who are good and worthy, not with those who are bad and low.*

There is an instructive story in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (Gaṇaka Moggallāna Sutta, no. 107) about a Brahmin accountant named Gaṇaka Moggallāna who went to see the Buddha when He was staying near Sāvatti in the monastery built for Him by Visākhā. Gaṇaka Moggallāna had a question to ask. He pointed out first that, in this life, many things were done gradually, step by step. “Is it not possible,” he then asked the Buddha, “to lay out a similar gradual training, gradual activities, a gradual practice with regard to this Doctrine and Discipline of yours?” The Buddha answered that it was indeed possible and explained the various steps to be taken when training in the Dhamma:

*One day, a Brahmin accountant came to the Master at East Park, saluted him with courteous greeting, and said: “As I approached this storied monastery, Reverend Gotama, I got a gradual view of it. Now, Reverend Gotama, just as, in a course of*



archery, the training of the archers is a progressive one, so also, with us Brahmins, our theological training is gradual, the approach is step by step. Is it possible, Reverend Gotama, for this Dhamma and discipline of yours to be likewise taught progressively?”

“It is so, Brahmin,” replied the Buddha. “Take the case of a clever horse trainer. He takes a thoroughbred in hand, gives him his first lesson with bit and bridle, and then proceeds with a further step. In exactly the same way, Brahmin, the Tathāgata takes in hand a man to be trained and gives him his first lesson, thus: ‘Come, brother! Be kind and harmless. Live self-restrained by the restraint of the Precepts. Become versed in the practice of good conduct. Seeing danger in trifling faults, undertake the training and become a pupil in the moralities.’

“As soon as he has mastered all that,” Sākyamuni continued, “the Tathāgata gives him his second lesson, thus: ‘Come, brother! Seeing an object with the eye, do not become captivated by its general appearance or by its details. Persist in overcoming that wretched dejection caused by craving, caused by an uncontrolled sense of sight — those evil states that could overwhelm one like a flood. Guard the sense of sight, win control over the sense of sight, and do the same with the other faculties of sense. When you hear a sound with the ear, smell an odor with the nose, taste a flavor with the tongue, or, with body, touch a tangible thing, or when, with mind, you are conscious of a thing, do not become captivated by objects of sense.’

“As soon as he has mastered all that, the Tathāgata gives him a further lesson, thus: ‘Come, brother! Use moderation in eating. Do not eat thoughtlessly, do not eat for the enjoyment of it, or as a luxury, or for making your body beautiful, but eat to keep yourself alive and in good health, free from sickness, and for strength and energy to pursue the Holy Life with this thought, I check my former

feeling. I will allow no new feeling to arise, that maintenance and comfort may be mine.’

“Then, Brahmin, when he has won restraint in food, the Tathāgata gives him a further lesson, thus: ‘Come, brother! Abide alert. By day and night, when walking, sitting, or lying down — in everything you do — be attentive and self-possessed, and cleanse your heart from things which may hinder you.’

“Then, Brahmin, when he is devoted to alertness, the Tathāgata gives him a further lesson, thus: ‘Come, brother! Be possessed of mindfulness and self-control. In going forth and going back, have yourself under control. In looking forward or looking behind, in bending or relaxing, in wearing robes or carrying bowl and robe, in eating, chewing, tasting, in relieving yourself, in walking, standing, sitting, lying, in sleeping or waking, in speaking or keeping silence, have yourself under control.’

“Then, Brahmin, when he is possessed of mindfulness and self-control, the Tathāgata gives him a further lesson, thus: ‘Come, brother! Seek out a secluded lodging, the root of a tree in a grove, a mountain, a cave or mountain grotto, a cemetery, a forest retreat, a heap of straw in the open air.’ And he does so. And, when he has eaten his food, he sits down cross-legged, and, keeping his body straight, he proceeds to practice meditation in order to attain the Absorptions.

“Now, Brahmin, for all monks who are pupils (sekha), who have not yet attained mastery of mind, who abide aspiring for the unsurpassed security of nibbāna, such is the method for my course of training.

“But, as to those monks who are Arahants, who have destroyed the poisons of lust, existence-infatuation, false view, and ignorance, who have lived the holy life, done their task, laid down the burden, won salvation, utterly destroyed the unwholesome roots of greed, hatred, and delusion, and are released by perfect Insight — for such as those, these things are conducive to comfort in

*the present life and to mindful self-control as well.”*

In this gradual training, the Buddha does not teach meditation until after the person to be trained has mastered a whole series of preliminary disciplines. It would behoove all to follow this gradual approach.

### Meditation Works

Garden describes various effects meditation can have on our psyche, such as detachment. For the most part, the effects that she describes are in agreement with the types of changes that are described in the scriptures and that are needed to bring about a true spiritual transformation. This unequivocally shows that meditation is, indeed, a powerful transformational technique, that is to say that “meditation works.” As I see the situation, the problem is not with meditation, *per se*, but with how it is approached — it must be properly taught, it must be properly understood, and it must be properly practiced. “Properly practiced” means that the instructions given by the Buddha must be meticulously followed — right motivation, right posture, right method, right dedication.

This brings us full circle to the points discussed in the preceding sections about the role of meditation in Buddhism as a spiritual disciple, about the pitfalls of meditation, and about how and when to incorporate meditation into one’s spiritual practice.

Chapter 7, The Arahats, of the *Dhammapada* describes the results of having fully developed the spiritual disciplines taught by the Buddha and achieved their goal.

90. *They have completed their journey; they are freed from sorrow and from all else. The bonds of life have fallen from them, and the fever (of passions) no longer exists in them.*
91. *The thoughtful strive diligently. They take no delight in home life, but forsake home*

*after home like swans leave the lake.*

92. *Arahats accumulate nothing. When taking food, they reflect over it with full understanding of its nature. Their sole goal is liberation, which is void and signless. Like the flight of birds in the sky, their path cannot be traced.*
93. *Arahats are free from cankers; they are not attached to food. Their sole goal is liberation, which is void and signless. Like the flight of birds in the sky, their path cannot be traced.*
94. *Even the gods cherish such steadfast ones, whose sense faculties are calm like horses well-trained by charioteers and who are free from pride and cankers.*
95. *Like the earth, Arahats are patient and cannot be provoked to respond in anger. They stand firm and steady like a column. They are serene and pure like a lake without mud. They are free from the cycle of birth and death.*
96. *Wisdom has stilled their minds, and their thoughts, words, and deeds are filled with peace. Truly knowing the Dhamma, they are free from moral defilements and are unperturbed by the ups and downs of life.*
97. *Those who are not credulous, who have realized the unconditioned, who have cut off the links of the round of rebirths, who have destroyed all consequences of good and bad deeds, who have discarded all craving, are indeed the noblest of all.*
98. *They make holy wherever they dwell, in a village or a forest, in a valley or on a hill.*
99. *With their senses at peace and their minds full of joy, they take delight in secluded forests, where worldlings are loath to go. ■*

## Suggestions for a Buddhist Wedding

In Theravādin Buddhist countries, marriage is regarded as a civil contract, not as a spiritual or religious union. Therefore, there is no standard Buddhist ceremony for marriage.

A wedding is an excellent time to renew your commitment to both the Triple Gem and the Five Precepts. In Buddhist countries, a couple might pay a visit to the local monastery shortly before or after their wedding to offer food to the monastic community, to recite the refuges and precepts in a formal way, to receive some Dhamma instruction, and, possibly, to receive blessings from the monks. If such a visit is not possible for you, you may put together your own refuges and precepts ceremony, using the formal ceremony as a guide. You might also want to consider reciting passages from the discourses that inspire you. ■

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## Is Vipassanā the Same as Theravāda?

No. The term *vipassanā* — often translated as “insight” — has a variety of meanings. First, it refers to the liberating intuitive understanding that marks the culmination of Buddhist meditation practice. In the Pali discourses, *vipassanā* also refers to the mind’s ability to witness clearly as events unfold in the present moment. In this sense, it is a skill that a meditator develops using a broad range of meditative tools and techniques. With practice, this skill can bring the meditator to the threshold of liberating insight. In its third meaning, one that has become especially popular in the West in recent years, “Vipassanā” refers to a system of meditation — *vipassanā bhāvanā*, or “Insight Meditation” — that is based upon an interpretation of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (*Majjhima Nikāya*, no. 10), the Buddha’s teaching on how to develop mindfulness (*sati*).

Followers of the popular Vipassanā movement often cite this *sutta* as the essence of the Buddha’s teachings; some even claim that the instructions it contains are the only ones necessary for achieving liberating insight. Theravādin Buddhism, by contrast, embraces the thousands of discourses of the Pali Canon, each highlighting a different aspect of the Buddha’s Teachings. In Theravāda, each discourse supports, depends upon, reflects, and informs all the others.

Although many students do find all they want in Vipassanā, some have a nagging sense that something fundamental is missing. This reaction is hardly surprising, inasmuch as the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta itself was delivered to a group of relatively advanced students who were already quite experienced and well established in the path of Dhamma practice.

Happily, all those missing pieces can be found in the Pali Canon. There, we find the Buddha’s teachings on generosity and virtue, the twin pillars upon which all spiritual practice is built. His teachings on the recollection of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha serve to strengthen the development of *saddhā* (“faith, confidence”), which provides a potent fuel to sustain Dhamma practice long after we return home from that meditation retreat. In the Canon, we also find his teachings on the drawbacks of sensuality and the value of renunciation; on developing *all* the factors in the Eightfold Path, including those that are seldom explored during organized Vipassanā retreats: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. And there is much, much more.

In Theravāda, the path to liberating insight does not boil down to a single meditation technique or to being continuously mindful. The path to Awakening is full of surprising twists and turns, but, thankfully, the Buddha left for us an assortment of tools to use and skills to learn to help us safely make the journey. ■

*These two pieces were originally prepared by John Bullitt. They have been abbreviated and lightly edited here.*

# Charleston Buddhist Fellowship

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